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Dear Ed and Harold -

This is in the current
"STORY;" I hope it amuses

you -

Love -

Kathy

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Louisa Huntington's Last Caller, at Easter

Louisa Huntington applied lipstick to the delicate outer edge of her eyelids, lightly tracing the line in a practiced gesture. Her famous eyelashes had once been a lush emblem of an entire era of charming and amusing people. Her picture on the wall at Sardi's was little more than a few dashes indicating the face that went with those eyelashes. Now, the face was unrecognizable without considerable retouching, and the trademark eyelashes had become wispy and pale.

But something was really wrong. Louisa looked into the mirror and scowled at her reflection. If she didn't put on her eyeglasses, an act she was loath to do, even in the privacy of her bedroom, she wouldn't be able to apply her makeup. Desperate, she snatched up her glasses from the litter on her dressing table, and deployed them a few inches in front of her face, the way she might once have flourished a jeweled lorgnette.

Louisa gasped at the sight of herself. With the glasses in one hand, she aimed them to peer down at the object she held in the other. Lipstick. She turned it over to read the tiny printing at its flat end, as if some face-saving explanation might be found there. *Wet Suede*. She dropped the lipstick and reached for a tissue with which to wipe away her mistake before it could be detected by the tiresome Miss Mindin. Miss Mundane. Descended from a long line of spinsters, no doubt.

It was quite difficult, really, to accommodate Miss Bossy Boots Mindin, but there had been no way around it. Louisa's daughter, Madeleine (a dull, sensible woman whose suburban existence with her pleasant husband and three children was a continuous puzzle to Louisa), had made it quite clear that there were worse things than having a companion, really sort of a personal secretary, living with her in the spare room down at the end of the hall.

Madeleine called this a choice she was giving her mother, but Louisa had slowly come to realize that she wasn't being given any choices, not really. Miss Marjorie Mindin or a nursing home. Miss Mindin or bust.

It takes a great deal of time, and effort, to look one's best, but Louisa couldn't imagine looking anything less than impeccable, even on days that held nothing in store beyond a trip to the podiatrist. And today being Easter, with

Steven Knox coming to take her out for lunch, Louisa was especially determined to look terrific.

People rarely asked, "Louisa, how do you do it?" anymore, for the simple reason that she no longer did it, she didn't radiate that ageless, clock-cheating vitality for which she had been renowned. These days, Louisa looked like what she was: a remarkably sturdy ninety-year-old. Spry. That was the word, a word used only to describe the elderly.

In recent years, Louisa had noticed that she had fewer friends and more acquaintances. Her oldest friends who hadn't actually died might just as well have, they were so decrepit and feeble and joyless. Obsessed with their digestive systems and their estates. And deaf! Louisa had absolutely hated her last lunch with Marion Harper, whom she had known since Miss Waltham's School for Girls. This was just before Miss Mindin. The poor thing couldn't hear a single word Louisa said unless she shouted, there had been trouble when the waiter brought the wrong food and insisted it was what Louisa had ordered, and then Marion had been shirty with her about Steven Knox.

"This young man you're going around with — he is, after all, a bit light in the loafers, isn't he, dear?" Marion had opined over the erroneous omelets. Bitch. She would know. Consider her husband, Otis Harper, dead these twenty years.

"I really don't know what you mean, Marion," Louisa had said with exaggerated, cold clarity, and regretted instantly not having taken the higher conversational road of ignoring the remark entirely.

"Well, I'm sure he's very good company, my dear, but I cannot help but think about poor Lillian Mortimer, that's all." Marion had eyed her triumphantly. She really did look decrepit. And silly, with two bright spots of old-fashioned rouge daubed on her cheeks.

Marion rattled on about Lillian Mortimer and how awful it was that her children and grandchildren hadn't taken more trouble to look after her at the end. Louisa tried not to listen. Throughout her entire life, Louisa had never liked spending time with old people. Why should anyone expect her to start liking it now?

Lillian Mortimer's sad fate had nothing to do with Louisa. Years and years ago, Lillian had been widowed unexpectedly when Edward, who was much older than she, dropped dead on the fourth tee at some Florida resort or other, and then there had been unattractive legal matters for quite some time because Edward seemed to have left his money not to Lillian and their three grown children, but in trust for the benefit of his secretary, some twenty-three-year-old nothing from outer Queens.

Lillian had died two years ago? Was it five? She was living in a nursing home by then. Louisa hadn't ever gone to see her after the move. There had

been a couple of telephone calls, but then Lillian had a stroke. Louisa knew that if she were in Lillian's situation, she would never want anyone to see her with half her face drooping down, saliva running out the corner of her mouth, wearing whatever some stupid-as-hell nurse thought to dress her in. It would be simply out of the question.

"I hope you haven't changed your will. It was a terribly difficult and thoughtless thing that Edward did to that family."

"Steven Knox doesn't want my money, Marion. What an offensive thing to say. Really!"

"What is it that Madeleine calls him? Steven Noxious?"

The problem with Marion Harper was that despite her deafness and increasing forgetfulness, she had an uncanny knack for not only eliciting from you various personal tidbits, but also recalling them at moments like this.

"Madeleine is a wet blanket. I really don't understand how my only child could have selected her genes entirely from the Huntington side of the family. The Hodgson sense of style seems to have been swamped by the Huntington stodginess. Maybe one of those over-indulged grandchildren of mine will rebel against her and enjoy life."

That shut Marion up for the moment. Louisa put an end to this annoying discussion by beckoning the waiter for their check. They pretended it was her turn to treat, but it was always her turn to treat, as she had money and Marion really just got by.

Ridiculous personage, the waiter. Who cared if his name was Philip? "I shall call you Waiter, if and when I call you anything," Louisa had interrupted at the first launching of his eager introductory remarks.

"My, my, aren't we getting all dolled up!" Miss Mindin was in the doorway. The door had been closed. Miss Mindin had not knocked. Louisa continued to gaze at her own reflection in the dressing table mirror. Miss Mindin stepped closer until Louisa could see the phony-baloney smile gleaming over her shoulder. Miss Mindin wore a starched white blouse over ghastly stretch pants which she called "slacks." Although it wasn't a uniform, something about her made it look like one. Personal secretary my foot. White blouses, Louisa had informed her right off the bat, reminded Louisa of snow, and virginity, and other useless things.

Madeleine had gone directly to the accountant, Mr. Teeth and Gums, what was his name? Mr. Low. She had done this the day after she observed Louisa mistakenly attempt to eat her scrambled eggs with a ballpoint pen instead of a fork—a simple error made when Louisa was tired and of course not wearing her glasses.

Louisa could just imagine Madeleine meeting with him, feeling terribly

virtuous and concerned about her scatterbrained mother. They had worked long and hard to procure the Mindin creature from some agency that specialized in supplying "companions." If she wanted companionship, Louisa would have got a dog. A whippet, like Argyle. He had been a grand little fellow, and such good company.

Oh, they had a fine time arranging all the details, spending her money. Madeleine and Mr. T & G worked it all out before they told her the first thing. It was a party to which Louisa had not been invited. A fete accompli, she might once have murmured to appreciative ears at just the right moment at an amusing dinner. It was the classic sort of Louisa Huntington remark that would have been circulated, printed in the society columns.

"I said, aren't we getting all dolled up?" Miss Mindin repeated, now picking up a sweater of Louisa's and putting it in the wrong drawer.

"I really wouldn't say that *we* were anything in particular, if I were you," Louisa said, moving her mouth as little as possible while applying foundation.

"Well, somebody's all wound up today," Miss Mindin observed in her nursely voice. She wouldn't have been able to get "dolled up" if her life depended on it. Miss Mindin was like a cross between a nun and a policewoman.

"*Somebody* had that door shut," Louisa said. Her hand holding the mascara wand trembled slightly. She waited for it to steady before beginning to stroke her lashes with the tiny brush.

"Wound up and touchy, too," said Miss Mindin agreeably, as though she were taking inventory for some checklist. Maybe she was. Did Madeleine get written reports of her mother's sleeping problems, her bowel movements, her moods? Probably. What a thought.

"I am expecting a caller. We are going for an Easter lunch. You are not invited." There. Was that frosty enough?

"Steven Knox isn't supposed to take you anywhere without me, Louisa. You know that. Madeleine explained to me all about what happened the last time he took you out. You went to the bathroom and got confused. Remember?" Miss Mindin was using her reasonable voice.

"I don't see why you need to come. Find your own man. Not that you'd know how." The bathroom business was ridiculous. Louisa hadn't been able to make out the signs on the doors, that was all. The restaurant to which Steven had taken her was dark. Yes, she had a couple of cocktails. Yes, she had noticed the urinal, but Steven often took her to amusing places that had been made over from other sorts of places.

Only when Louisa had been washing her hands, and she was trying to puzzle out the meaning of a sign over the urinal that said WE AIM TO PLEASE, YOU AIM TOO, PLEASE, did it begin to dawn on her that this was not the ladies' room. The man who came in just then, already unzipped, waterworks at

hand, was most unpleasant. There was no need to make such a scene. Were he not so rude, Louisa would not have sneered, "You call *that* a penis?" Had she refrained from the remark, the man would probably not have reported her to the manager, and she and Steven would not have been asked to leave.

But it was a simple mistake, going in there, not a sign of senility. It had happened to Louisa before, years ago, at a hunt club dance in Newport where the bathroom doors were labeled POINTERS and SETTERS, for God's sake. The real mistake had been in telling Madeleine the story, which was, after all, rather amusing.

Louisa was finished with her face. She stood and turned. "I am going to get dressed now, in the privacy of my own room."

Miss Mindin smirked, and ostentatiously backed out of the room in a parody of respect. Louisa closed the door and then stood against it, listening. As she suspected, Miss Mindin was telephoning. She could hear the sound of the Mindin voice without being able to make out the words. Oh well. Madeleine would be proposing some tiresome compromise, perhaps something along the lines of Miss Mindin sitting alone at the next table, as though she and Steven were independent little children being supervised in public.

In her slip, Louisa spritzed herself with Joy. What to wear? Louisa thought the Balenciaga suit. Hard to believe it was sixty years old. She had bought it in Milan, on an anniversary trip with Arthur. He had liked the way she looked in it, and he had told her she ought to wear pink more often. She could still remember the afternoon she bought the suit, the flirtatious tailor who fitted it. So many things change, but a good Balenciaga suit is forever. The suit was twice as old as Steven Knox.

He would be here very soon. Thirty-four isn't all that young. By the time Louisa was thirty-four, Madeleine was eleven, Arthur was already involved with that Contessa (no one thought it would last, but it did), and Louisa was already feeling her age when she surveyed the competition.

Steven Knox was an unusual young man. No one in his generation was particularly informed about Louisa's era. But he knew everything, and he was deeply interested. It wasn't just trivia to him. He could sing all the words to songs she had forgotten. He could name people and events Louisa hadn't thought about in years, people and events no one else talked about anymore.

Though every now and then someone did write up a nostalgia piece, on the anniversary or revival of something or other, and if an editor was old enough to know about Louisa Huntington, some little reporter would arrive, obviously astonished to find her sentient, and attempt to interview her.

"You must have had such an interesting life," squeaked the last one, a girl with nice enough features but no sense at all about how to dress or the

value of a good hairstyle, let alone knowledge of depilatories.

"I'm still having it," Louisa had replied, dry as dry could be, though the point of such remarks was now entirely her own amusement.

This was why Steven Knox was such a relief. He loved her wit. He already knew most of her best lines before they met. They had met . . . well, Louisa didn't really like to say how they met. It was a pickup, more or less, at the glove counter at Saks. Where he worked. Where he used to work. Oh, what did it matter? What Madeleine didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

Miss Mindin was off the phone, her strategy in place, and was now in the hall bathroom. Louisa eased her door open partway and listened to the sound of water running. Miss Mindin probably washed according to some instruction chart: First scrub body part A. Rinse thoroughly.

Louisa stood outside the bathroom door. The key was in the lock. Careless, careless. Miss Mindin didn't want the key left in the lock on the inside of the bathroom door, because *someone* might accidentally lock herself in. It had happened.

Louisa turned the key to lock the door. Scrub those Mindin body parts well. Take all the time you want.

The doorman buzzed from downstairs. Louisa removed the key and walked briskly toward the foyer. She put the key down in the bowl on the front-hall table, where under the Mindin Regime all keys must be kept. Pre-Mindin, Louisa had locked herself out many times. That's what the nice man with the dalmatian across the hall was there for. It had never been a big problem, save the last such occasion, when the dalmatian man was away, which became one of the mouth-pursing "episodes" Madeleine had invoked when making the case for Miss Mindin.

"Send him up!" Louisa shouted into the speaker thing on the wall. She was never certain when she was supposed to push which button. A loud banging began in the hall bathroom.

"Don't be naughty, Louisa. How dare you lock me in here. You open the door right now!" Miss Mindin called. She was silent a moment. "Louisa? Are you there? Are you all right? Don't be angry with me, lovey." Miss Mindin was covering all the bases, alternating between a scolding and a wheedling tone. She began to pound on the door again.

Out in the hallway, the elevator door opened and closed. Louisa knew its noise. She could still recall the sound the old elevator door made, with the sliding metal gate. The building had been modernized a long time ago. Twenty years? Thirty? Harry, the day man, used to run to the liquor store for her.

The doorbell chimed. Louisa checked herself in the mirror. The suit was really excellent, the color just right for an Easter lunch. She grimaced into

her reflection, baring her teeth and peering at an angle. Lipstick on teeth should get the death penalty. But not to worry. However, one must remember to stand up straight. Dowager's humps are for dowagers. Louisa threw back her shoulders, picked up her small alligator clutch, and opened the door.

Steven Knox was standing there, looking handsome as always. He was wearing a very large yellow bow tie that went perfectly with his striped shirt and tweed jacket. His hair was parted in the middle in the old-fashioned way, and just now he tossed his head back to flip a few strands out of his eyes, a gesture that always made Louisa think of restless race horses. He was holding a bouquet of sweetheart roses.

Before he could say more than the usual "Lu!" (to which she would always reply with a coy and girlish "Tul!"), she plucked the roses from him and tossed them behind her into her foyer, stepping out into the hall and pulling the door shut in one graceful, charming gesture.

"I'm all set, my darling. Shall we?" She pushed the elevator button impatiently and the doors slid open. Steven kissed her on the cheek as she took his arm and they stepped into the elevator.

"You're looking lovely," he said, appraising her. "The Balenciaga from Milan? And joy of joys, you're Mindin-less!" The pounding sound could be heard faintly as they began to descend. Steven tilted his head inquisitively.

"Someone must be hanging a picture," said Louisa, who was drawing on her pale gray gloves. "It's so easy to crack the plaster if you don't do it just right."

Out on the sidewalk in front of her building it was extraordinarily bright, and the air had a soft, sun-warmed feeling. One could do so many things on a day like this. Two black women in white uniforms passed, talking in animated voices in a language or dialect Louisa didn't know. Perhaps they were from the same island. They walked slowly, pushing matching white babies in fancy strollers.

The nannies glanced simultaneously at Louisa, and then both smiled as they glided past. Such beautiful white teeth. One said something to the other, and the liquid, silvery trills of their laughter floated behind them, wafted by the breeze of a passing taxi.

The dalmatian man nodded hello. Louisa nodded back. He was carrying a little plastic bag, for the dog mess, and he was wearing shorts, which wasn't really a good idea with those legs. The dalmatian dawdled behind him, hoisting a leg high over the bed of ivy by the curb.

A young couple suddenly flew by on those new roller skates with wheels that look like blades. They wore tight black outfits, and they held hands as they darted together through traffic. The way they moved reminded Louisa of dancing.

I still want all this, Louisa thought. I'm not ready to give up my life. I simply won't allow them to take what's mine.

The doorman — the little one, whose name was José or Juan or something like that, Louisa couldn't keep track anymore, not since Mike retired — asked if they needed a taxi. In the old days, doormen were much, much taller, and they called one Mrs. Huntington, not sweetheart.

"No, I wouldn't dream of it, thank you just the same," Louisa said, with a wave of her gloved hand. She slipped the other one through Steven Knox's proffered arm. "It's glorious weather, and we've got the whole afternoon."

far from where a lot of us Indians lived. There seemed a link between that corral full of animals and so many of the stories in our lives. I put the story away, and when I started working on my collection about a year ago, I picked it up again. The slaughterhouse is gone now (I think a corner shopping center sits in its place), but the people I knew, many of them cousins and friends, are mostly still in Santa Rosa, continuing on."

BRADY UDALL, a native of St. Johns, Arizona, is in his first year at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he holds an Iowa Arts Fellowship. He has stories forthcoming in *Sunstone*, *Aethlon*, and *Playboy* as first-prize winner of its college competition. He lives on the banks of the Iowa River with his wife, Kate.

"About a year ago when I was living in Korea, I woke up one morning with an image, possibly the remnant of a dream, stuck in my head: a small boy sitting at a table wearing a wig, and a father who is terribly disturbed by this. All I had to do was ask, 'Why is the father so upset?' The answer came easily and I hopped up from my little mat on the floor and started typing."

KATHARINE WEBER's first story appeared in *The New Yorker* last year. "Louisa Huntington's Last Caller, at Easter" is her second published story. Her first novel, *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*, is forthcoming from Crown in 1995. She has written for various publications, including *Publishers Weekly*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *The Boston Globe*. Her essay "Without a Backward Cast: Notes of an Angler" was included in the anthology *Uncommon Waters: Women Write About Fishing* (Seal Press). She lives in Connecticut with her husband and their two daughters.

"I've been privileged to know, and have in my family, several women a little bit like Louisa Huntington. You glimpse them walking on city streets; though they're not unique to New York, they are part of the Upper East Side landscape. Relics of another era, they know exactly who they are, while at the same time the world around them has shifted mysteriously, frighteningly. They're gradually losing ground, which they know in an unacknowledged way, but there is something admirable, and deeply touching, about their dignified struggle to keep going, to hold together."